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An
Inaugural Dissertation
on
Dysentery
for the Degree of Doctor
of Medicine in the University
of Pennsylvania by
George Huhn, Feb 18th 1828.
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"Dysentery is a disease in which the patient has frequent stools accompanied with severe pain and followed by tenesmus,"

"The stools though frequent, are small in quantity, and consist chiefly of mucous mixed with blood; natural faces seldom appear and when they do are in a hardened compact form, called Scybala."

The above definition of the disease, as given by Cullen, conveys as clear an idea of its character, perhaps, as any that can be formed, when it appears under its ordinary symptoms; but in some cases, it is so violent, that notwithstanding the patient may have an almost continual disposition to evacuate his bowels, he is unable to discharge any thing from them; the inflam= =mation in these cases having transcended the point of secretion, in the spasm of the bowels is too rigid to permit their ex= =halents from pouring out their contents.

Causes. — Dysentery was at one time thought to arise exclusively from contagion; but that opinion is now pretty generally abandoned, and its remote cause is sought for among those of an autumnal fever.

Its exciting causes are exposure to cold, damp clothes, great bodily fatigue, unwholesome undigestible food, sleeping on the ground, or in damp rooms, and in short to all those causes which excite fevers — common to the season in which Dysentery generally prevails, will in certain habits, produce the latter disease.

Dysentery is always attended with fever, — and this may be either intermittent, remittent, or continued, depending upon the violence of the remote cause, the degree ~~upon~~ of the susceptibility of the patient, and the length of time he is exposed to its action.

If the fever be of the continued type,

its grade will be either inflammatory or typhus and upon which one of these states of excitement it assumes, its contagious or non-contagious nature depends.

In the common form of this disease the patient is troubled for some days previous to the attack with flatulency and constipation of the bowels, and when those symptoms which more particularly characterize it, are about to appear, he experiences alternate sensations of cold and heat; nausea, and vomiting frequently ensue, and these are soon followed by pain and griping of the bowels, with an inclination to go to stool.

Sometimes, however tormina, bloody stools, and tenesmus are the first symptoms that appear.

The inflammatory nature of this complaint has been fully established by dissections, and from the nature, with which it is generally ushered in, the stomach, or liver,

would appear to be the organ in which the primary irritation is seated, from whence it is extended to the large intestines, where its force is ultimately expended, as has been already stated, the fever attendant upon this disease may assume any type, from an intermittent, to a continued form and by far its most common character is inflammatory; in the treatment of which, we have three leading indications to fulfill.

First, to subdue inflammation and spasm; Second, to remove irritation and allay irritability and Thirdly, to restore the healthy condition of the skin, which is in the early stages hot and dry.

To answer the first indication the Lancet is decidedly the best remedy; it not only lessens the inflammation, but it relaxes the spasm of the intestines which before existed, and occasioning great

pain in them, which prevented their free evacuation.

But to gain that object effectually, it must not be used with a sparing hand; on the contrary, the blood must be allowed to flow, until there is a mitigation of the pain, and soreness of the abdomen, or a reduction of the volume and tension of the belly, or a disposition to syncope is manifested, when it will be proper to remove the ligature from the arm, and proceed to the evacuations of the alimentary canal.

If much hardness should be present, the first medicines we should have recourse to, for this purpose, must be Emetics, and of these the Ipecacuanha is to be preferred,

This substance, not only evacuates the stomach of its vitiated contents, but by its tonic and antispasmodic properties,

it enables that organ to retain the cathartics, which should follow its operation, and assist them in opening the bowels, whilst like every other article of its class, it excites the skin to the performance of its healthy functions, and thus lessens the violence of disease action in the intestines.

After the operation of the Emetic has ceased, and the stomach is sufficiently composed, the exhibition of Purgatives, should commence, and of these there are some decidedly more efficacious than others.

The experiments of Dr Johnson while in the East Indies, when he had an opportunity of testing the different methods of treating this dreadful complaint, resulted in his entire preference of large doses of Calomel, combined with Opium over every other plan; and the experience of others, since his time, in the East, and West =

= Indies, in Europe, and in America, has fully confirmed the correctness of his pathological views of this disease, and the superiority of his plan of treating it.

It was formerly the custom to trust almost exclusively to Castor Oil, the Neutral Salts, and Opium for the cure of Dysentery, means wholly insufficient to the end.

Without making therefore any further use of them, than merely to quicken the action of other more effectual Cathartics, we commence the Mercurial treatment: by administering twenty grains of Calomel, with, or without, the addition of the Opium, according to the degree of pain the patient experiences, and repeat it, every six hours, untill natural stools, or passes are obtained, and then keeps the bowels in a soluble state by means of Castor Oil, Epsom Salts, or Magnesia, in

doses sufficiently large and often repeated to produce that effect.

Calomel given in the doses we have mentioned is the mildest and most certain purgative we possess.

Castor oil as a cathartic is slow; but the relief it affords from tormina, and tenesmus is prompt and decisive.

It is rarely necessary to give more than a second dose of the medicine to procure fecal evacuations, and these discharges accompanied as they generally are with large quantities of bilious intestinal mucous, and black mucoid bile, produce the most soothing and comfortable feeling to the patient.

His pulse becomes less frequent and tense, it is soft, round and light, a moisture breaks out upon the skin, and he falls into gentle, refreshing slumber, which frequently continue an hour or two

before he is again urged to the stool.

The action that has been excited in the bowels by the calomel and the opium I find given to the circulation through the liver, must now be kept up by those means above mentioned, viz, castor oil, Epsom salts & Magnesia, unless the discharges assume a healthy appearance when we may change the use of laxatives, unless symptoms should again indicate their necessity, and resort to Diaphoretics; among these the common prescription of Ipecacuanha, Calomel, and Opium in the following proportions answers extremely well,

℞. calomel ℈ss gr. x.

Pulv. Ipecac:

Opium ℈ss à gr. viij.

M. ft. Pulv. doz. viij, one to be taken every six hours, in a small quantity of Molasses.

This prescription in general is sufficiently

active as a Diaphoretic, and while the opium counteracts the purgative, the Calomel and Ipecacuanha, restores the liver and bowels to a healthy state of secretory action and produces one or two copious and consistent stools discharges in the twenty four hours, to the manifest improvement of the strength and spirits of the patient.

When the skin is unusually torpid, we may substitute the Compound Powder with the addition of two grains of Calomel to each dose, and allow the patient a free use of warm barley water, or any other mild diluent drink he may choose.

It not unfrequently happens that the patient is very much troubled with spasms of the bowels and tenesmus even after the discharges have become of comparative healthy appearance.

The skin in this case is always dry, -

and of a peculiar "hurry" feel, the temperature is somewhat above the healthy range, he is very thirsty, gets but little sleep, is unrefreshed, irritable and despondent, the circulation here is evidently confined to the great vessels, and centered up in the fullness of the abdominal viscera.

In addition to our internal diaphoretics, we must now make use of some warm fomentations, the warm bath, and if the abdomen is tender to the pressure of the fingers upon it, leeches and blisters must be applied and at this junction the diaphoretic should be omitted, and a scruple of calomel again exhibited, to be carried off, in eight hours, with an ounce of castor oil.

This combination of active measures will rarely fail so to equalize the circulation and the excitability as to leave very little further to be attended to except the regulation of the patient's diet, which should

be most carefully directed, by the physician and closely adhered to by the patient.

The articles most proper for him to make use of at this time, are Arrow root, well boiled Tapioca or Sago, Mucilage of Gum arabic, a decoction of the bark of the Hippory, Skin chicken broth, or beef tea, mutton broth and soft boiled eggs.

If the application of a blister to the abdomen has been necessary, a flannel roller bound moderately tight, as soon as the blister is sufficiently well to admit of it, should be passed from the hips to the arm pits, and secured with pins, and shoulder straps.

This bandage affords, as with one of the most efficient means we possess of keeping up the action of the cutaneous vessels and by doing it we save the patient from a relapse which is so much to be dreaded in all severe bowel complaints.

It should therefore be worn until the

health of the individual is perfectly reestablished

After the violence and danger of Dysentery have in a great measure been subdued the patient is not unfrequently much harassed with tenesmus,

For the relief of this symptom a variety of local means have been employed, and appear in some cases to afford considerable relief.

Those most commonly used are injections of different kinds, such as Starch and Laudanum, — indeed tea, Melted lard, or butter free from Salt and rancidity, Mutton broth &c.

But as far as my experience has extended the irritability of the rectum, is so great, that they are all expelled too soon to be of much service, and I believe that greater benefit will be found to result, from a suppository of opium, containing three or four grains rolled in the form of a cone —

and introduced upon the point of the finger just within the sphincter ani, than from any other application we can make for the relief of tenesmus.

It possesses the advantage of being so small that the rectum is hardly (if I may use the term) conscious of its presence and will therefore allow it to remain without making an effort to remove it, and all the good effects of an anodyne injection will be obtained.

But after all, permanent freedom from this distressing symptom can only be obtained by preventing the accumulation of faeces and vitiated secretions in the bowels, by the use of proper laxatives, and diet.

With regard to the use of tonics during convalescence from an attack of ordinary Dysentery (which is the only kind I have yet considered or propose at this time to investigate) I believe that the best of them is to be —

found in carriage gestation; exercise in the open air, and a bottle of good old Port Wine.

Should the disease put on the intermittent character then the quinine, and other articles used in the treatment of that state of fever will be indispensible.

I have now detailed what I consider the best means of treating dysentery as it usually occurs in this section of the United States.

It would be very easy, for me to increase the number of articles, by adding those which have been in use, and which still continue to be used by certain practitioners; but I am not aware that I should by so doing, add anything to the efficient force, that we are capable of bringing into the field against this enemy to human life; and to increase the number of pages in every essay, by lengthening the catalogue of remedies —

without at all increasing our power over the disease, but merely adding useless forage of prescriptions, would be an unnecessary waste of my time and — obtrusion upon your patience; relying therefore upon your generosity, I have — merely selected from the different plans of treating dysentery, the one that I have seen most effectual, and exhibited to you the outlines of one which I shall pursue in my own practice whenever — called upon to oppose this appalling foe.

Medical Professors and Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania;

With every sentiment of respect I am gentlemen, your obedient humble servant, —

George Hewson
M.D.